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Nuclear Hero's 'Crime' Was Making Us Safer

by Daniel Ellsberg

Mordechai Vanunu is the preeminent hero of the nuclear era. He consciously risked all he had in life to warn his own country and the world of the true extent of the nuclear danger facing us. And he paid the full price, a burden in many ways worse than death, for his heroic act — for doing exactly what he should have done and what others should be doing.

Vanunu's "crime" was committed in 1986, when he gave the London Sunday Times a series of photos he had taken within the Israeli nuclear weapons facility at Dimona, where he had worked as a technician.

For that act — revealing that his country's program and stockpile were much larger than the CIA or others had estimated — Vanunu was kidnapped from the Rome airport by agents of the Israeli Mossad and secretly transported back for a closed trial in which he was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

He spent the first 11 1/2 years in solitary confinement in a 6-by-9-foot cell, an unprecedented term of solitary under conditions that Amnesty International called "cruel, inhuman and degrading."

Now, after serving his full term, he is due to be released today. But his "unfreedom" is to be continued by restrictions on his movements and his contacts: He cannot leave Israel, he will be confined to a single town, he cannot communicate with foreigners face to face or by phone, fax or e-mail (purely punitive conditions because any classified information that he may have possessed is by now nearly two decades old).

The irony of all this is that no country in the world has a stronger stake than Israel in preventing nuclear proliferation, above all in the Middle East. Yet Israel's secret nuclear policies — to this day it does not acknowledge that it possesses such weapons — are shortsighted and self-destructive. They promote rather than block proliferation by encouraging the country's neighbors to develop their own, comparable weapons.

This will not change without public mobilization and democratic pressure, which in turn demand public awareness and discussion. It was precisely this that Vanunu sought to stimulate.

Not in Israel or in any other case — not that of the U.S., Russia, England, France, China, India or Pakistan — has the decision to become a nuclear weapons state ever been made democratically or even with the knowledge of the full Cabinet. It is likely that in an open discussion not one of these states could convince its own people or the rest of the world that it had a legitimate reason for possessing as many warheads as the several hundred that Israel allegedly has (far beyond any plausible requirement for

deterrence).

More Vanunus are urgently needed. That is true not only in Israel but in every nuclear weapons state, declared and undeclared. Can anyone fail to recognize the value to world security of a heroic Pakistani, Indian, Iraqi, Iranian or North Korean Vanunu making comparable revelations?

And the world's need for such secret-telling is not limited to citizens of what nuclear weapons states presumptuously call rogue nations. Every nuclear weapons state has secret policies, aims, programs and plans that contradict its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the 1995 Declaration of Principles agreed to at the NPT Renewal Conference. Every official with knowledge of these violations could and should consider doing what Vanunu did.

That is what I should have done in the early '60s based on what I knew about the secret nuclear planning and practices of the United States when I consulted at the Defense Department, on loan from the Rand Corp., on problems of nuclear command and control. I drafted the Secretary of Defense Guidance to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the general nuclear war plans, and the extreme dangers of our practices and plan were apparent to me.

I now feel derelict for wrongfully keeping secret the documents in my safe revealing this catastrophically reckless posture. But I did not then have Vanunu's example to guide me.

When I finally did have an example in front of me — that of young Americans who were choosing to go to prison rather than participate in what I too knew was a hopeless, immoral war — I was inspired in 1971 to turn over a top-secret history of presidential lies about the war in Vietnam to 19 newspapers. I regret only that I didn't do it earlier, before the bombs started falling.

Vanunu should long since have been released from solitary and from prison, not because he has "suffered enough" but because what he did was the correct and courageous thing to do in the face of the foreseeable efforts to silence and punish him.

The outrageous and illegal restrictions proposed to be inflicted on him when he finally steps out of prison after 18 years should be widely protested and rejected, not only because they violate his fundamental human rights but because the world needs to hear this man's voice.

The cult and culture of secrecy in every nuclear weapons state have endangered humanity and continues to threaten its survival. Vanunu's challenge to that wrongful and dangerous secrecy must be joined worldwide.

Daniel Ellsberg, a former State Department and Defense Department official, released the 'Pentagon Papers' to the press in 1971

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